

Thomas Hobbes: Absolute Rule by Kings

Thomas Hobbes was born in England in 1588. He wrote about many subjects, including politics and government. He tried to give a rational basis for absolute (unlimited) rule by kings.

The son of a clergyman, Hobbes studied at Oxford University. As an adult, he traveled to other European countries, where he met many writers, scientists, and philosophers. He studied mathematics and science as well as history and government. His studies inspired him to take a scientific approach to problems of human society.

Hobbes's thinking about society was greatly influenced by events in England in the mid 1600s. The king was struggling for power with Parliament, England's lawmaking body. In 1642, civil war broke out between supporters of the monarch and Parliament. Hobbes sided with the king.

In 1649, the king was beheaded. For the next several years, England was ruled by Parliament's House of Commons. But disorder and discontent continued. Finally, in 1660, the monarchy was restored.

The chaos of these years had a powerful impact on Hobbes. What, he asked, is the basis of social order? To answer this question, he tried to reason from his observations of human nature.

In Hobbes's view, human beings were naturally cruel, selfish, and greedy. In 1651, he published a book called *Leviathan*. In this book, he wrote that people are driven by a restless desire for power. Without laws or other social controls, people would always be in conflict. In such a "state of nature," life would be "nasty, brutish and short."

Governments, Hobbes said, were created to protect people from their own selfishness. Because people were selfish by nature, they could not be trusted to make decisions that were good for society as a whole. Only a government that has a ruler with absolute authority could maintain an orderly society.

Later Enlightenment thinkers came to quite different conclusions about human nature and the best form of government. Hobbes was important, however, because he was one of the first thinkers to apply the tools of the Scientific Revolution to problems of politics. His philosophy may sound harsh, but he believed it was based on objective observation and sound reasoning.

Questions

1. In his book *Leviathan*, Hobbes described his beliefs about what human beings are really like. What are some words he might use to describe what people are really like?
2. According to Hobbes, why were governments created? What kind of government did he think was best, and why?

John Locke: Natural Rights

John Locke was born in England in 1632. His thinking about government and people's rights had a major impact on the Enlightenment.

Thomas Hobbes had argued that kings should have absolute power. In contrast, Locke favored constitutional monarchy. In this type of government, a basic set of laws limits the ruler's power.

Locke's ideas reflected a long tradition in England. Recall how English barons forced King John to accept the Magna Carta in 1215. The Magna Carta favored nobles rather than common people, but it established the idea of rights and liberties that the king had to respect.

Over time, Parliament became the main check on the king's power. During the civil war of the 1640s, Locke's father fought on the side of Parliament. The young Locke was greatly influenced by his father's beliefs.

In the 1680s, another crisis developed. The new king, James II, was Catholic. His enemies in Protestant England feared that he wanted to put Catholics in power. In 1688, they forced James to flee the country.

The next year, Parliament gave the crown to a Protestant, King William III. Parliament also passed a bill of rights. The English Bill of Rights strengthened the power of Parliament as the representative of the people. For example, it forbade the king to keep a standing army in peacetime or to levy taxes without Parliament's consent. It also listed individual rights. Among them were protection in court cases from excessive fines and "cruel and unusual punishment."

Locke approved of these changes in England. In 1690, he published *Two Treatises of Government*. In this book, he offered a theory of government that justified Parliament's actions.

Locke denied the divine right of kings to rule. The true basis of government, he wrote, was a social contract, or agreement, among free people. The purpose of government was to protect people's natural rights. These included the right to life, liberty, and property. In exchange for this protection, people gave government the power to make and enforce laws.

In Locke's theory, a government's authority was based on the consent of the governed. If the government failed to respect people's rights, it could be overthrown.

Locke's view of government had a wide influence. In 1776, his ideas would be echoed in the American Declaration of Independence.

Questions

1. According to Locke, what was the purpose of government? What rights did he think government should protect?
2. In his book *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke argued that governments should only exist with the consent or approval of whom? What did he say should happen if the government does not do its job?

Baron de Montesquieu:

Separation of Powers

Charles-Louis de Secondat was born in France in 1689. He is better known by his title, the Baron de Montesquieu.

In his youth, Montesquieu attended a Catholic school. Later he became a lawyer. When his uncle died in 1716, Montesquieu inherited the title of baron along with his uncle's fortune. He also became president of the local parliament.

In 1721, Montesquieu achieved fame as a writer with a book called *Persian Letters*. The book described French society as seen by fictional travelers from Persia. It used humor to criticize French institutions, including the king's court and the Catholic Church. It quickly became very popular, and Montesquieu became an admired guest in the salons of Paris.

Montesquieu's most famous book was *The Spirit of Laws*, published in 1748. In this book, he described his theory of how governments should be organized.

Like John Locke, Montesquieu was concerned with how to protect political liberty. The best way to do this, he argued, was to divide power among three branches of government. In such a system, the legislative branch made the laws. The executive branch enforced the laws. The judicial branch interpreted the laws. The three branches should be separate but equal. In this way, no one branch would be too powerful. Montesquieu called this concept the *separation of powers*.

Montesquieu's theory reflected his admiration for the English system of government. In England, lawmaking was the job of Parliament. The king enforced the laws, and courts interpreted them. Each branch of government checked (limited) the power of the others. When powers were not separated in this way, Montesquieu warned, liberty was soon lost. Too much power in the hands of any one person or group led to despotism (tyranny).

Montesquieu's ideas had a powerful impact on later thinkers. Among them were the men who wrote the U.S. Constitution. They made the separation of powers a key part of the American system of government.

Questions

1. In his book *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu described how he thought governments should be organized. What was the name of his idea, and how did it work?
2. According to Montesquieu, what might happen if governments did not use this idea?

Voltaire: Religious Tolerance and Free Speech

Francois-Marie Arouet was born in France in 1694. Under the pen name Voltaire, he became one of the most celebrated writers of the Enlightenment.

As a young man, Voltaire attended a Catholic college in Paris. After college, he settled on a career in literature. He soon earned fame as a writer and as a witty participant in Paris salons.

Voltaire believed passionately in reforming society in the name of justice and human happiness. He warred against what he saw as superstition, error, and oppression. With biting humor, he attacked the French court and the power of the Catholic clergy.

One of Voltaire's most popular books was a humorous novel called *Candide*. The novel poked fun at the idea that the world made by God must necessarily be "the best of all possible worlds." Such a belief, Voltaire thought, prevented people from fighting the evils in the world.

Like Montesquieu, Voltaire admired England's constitutional monarchy and separation of powers. In his view, the English were governed by law, not by the arbitrary wishes of a single ruler. To be governed by law, he said, was "man's most cherished right."

Voltaire was especially concerned with freedom of thought and expression. He championed religious tolerance. This meant allowing people to profess religion in their own ways. Religious strife, he thought, was one of the main sources of evil in the world. In reality, no single religion possessed all the truth. At the same time, there was a core of truth in all religions. This core was the "natural religion" that reason made available to everyone.

Voltaire also spoke out for the right of free speech. Once he wrote a letter to a man he strongly disagreed with. He said that he would give his life so that his opponent could continue to write. A later writer expressed Voltaire's feeling in the words, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Throughout his life, Voltaire criticized intolerance and oppression wherever he saw them. His outspoken ways often led to conflicts with authorities. Twice he spent time in prison. Several times he was forced to flee to another city or country when his opinions made him unwelcome.

Questions

1. Voltaire believed in a right so strongly that he said he would defend it to the death. What was that right?
2. Voltaire was well known for criticizing intolerance wherever he saw it. What happened to him because of his outspoken criticism of authorities?